

**The Bill Blackwood
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Plain Language v. Coded Communication

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ABSTRACT

Law enforcement agencies should utilize the concept of plain language as opposed to the use of coded communication as it pertains to radio traffic. Coded communication has become an outdated and unnecessary form of communication as well as a safety factor when communicating with outside agencies from neighboring departments. The need for assistance from outside agencies has increased as the economy has decreased making the need for a standardized means of communication more crucial. The implementation of plain language could serve as a tool to increase productivity, shorten field training programs and eliminate stressors for newly hired officers as well as communication officers. In this world of ever-advancing technology, what was once meant to be unknown is now known through police scanners, cell phone apps and the internet, proving even more that coded communication is no longer beneficial.

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INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies should utilize the concept of plain language as opposed to the usage of signal codes, 10 codes and clearance codes as it pertains to communication with radio traffic. It has been an accepted practice within the law enforcement community to try to “out think” suspects and to protect the general public by the utilization of such coded language. The use of such radio language was perceived as a safety issue within the law enforcement community. Coded communication was thought to be a tool that officials could use to disguise what the type of event or situation that that officers were being dispatched to as well as cloak what activities were being accomplished. It was perceived that the general public would not have knowledge of the type of call that law enforcement officials are responding to, making for a safer working environment. The safety factor is thought to be that officials are disguised from the public in their actions. Coded radio traffic has become an outdated and unnecessary form of communication. The lack of a universal system of coded radio communication has become a topic of discussion throughout law enforcement agencies that needs to be addressed. Even a universal system of coded language, throughout the United States, would need to be a continuously changing system to keep the information unknown, which would just further add to the confusion and further prove its lack of necessity.

In the recent declining economy, it has become an unintentional burden for law enforcement agencies that they have a declining work force (Byers, 2011). Due to this decline in manpower, it has become essential to utilize outside (neighboring) agencies for officer or agency assistance. Most neighboring agencies are already using a scan

feature on their in-car radio systems that allows them to monitor neighboring agencies so that they are aware of events happening in their surrounding area in the event that a nearby officer or agency has the need for assistance. If, in fact, the agency that is or will be requesting assistance is an agency that still uses secretive signal codes, it will further the burden the officer or even the dispatcher who already has enough to worry about by having to explain what type of event is happening that requires assistance.

POSITION

Law enforcement agencies are not restricted nor is there any mandate on radio codes to be universal. Knisley (2012) stated, "One may take the plain speech technique and universal equipment further to advocate use not only within his or her own department, but also unify neighboring departments so as to provide smooth communication during interdepartmental mutual aid" (para. 12). Agencies have the ability and freedom to set any code that they wish to correspond with any calls for service that they have. Agencies that still use codes for radio communication can make them specific to their particular agency. In reality, two neighboring agencies can both use codes and although these codes could have the same number, the numbers do not necessarily correspond to the same event which is occurring within the agencies. Agency "A" could be responding to a signal one, which for this particular agency is a suspect with a gun and requests emergency assistance from another agency. The assisting agency, agency "B", could also be using codes but this agency's signal one is a patrol car or emergency vehicle which has a flat tire. The confusion that this causes could have a law enforcement officer slowly responding to assist thinking that it is a minor assist other agency call. The first problem with this scenario is that agency "B"

might not be responding with the urgency that agency “A” is expecting. The second problem that could occur is as the assisting officer is arriving on scene there could be gun fire that he was unaware of which places more officers and the general public in harm’s way, for which we have sworn to protect. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, (National Institute of Justice, 2007) “Interoperability is more likely to be effective when public safety agencies use plain language radio communications, allowing first responders to accurately relay information from one agency to another” (para. 3).

Monetary effect on the agency could be detrimental in some instances. In the National Incident Management Alert (NIMS, 2006) it was determined that agencies that still utilize coded language can have devastating and negative results in an emergency situation. The National Incident Management Alert advises that in an emergency situation, if an agency does not utilize plain language with radio traffic, that Federal Preparedness grant funding could be withheld or denied to the agency for this violation. It should be noted that the National Incident Management Alert is not mandating that the use of plain language is mandatory for day to day operations but is mandatory in emergency situations. This topic was also brought up in a FEMA NIMS Alert article (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2009) where they state that the use of plain language in emergency response is a matter of public safety especially when it comes to the safety of first responders and those affected by the incident. This use of coded communication has continued to be a major concern during major disasters such as Hurricane Katrina as well as the attack of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Because of 9-11 and the mass confusion that arose from coded communication across different agencies, there has been a national process to bring all agencies into

compliance with the Department of Homeland Security and that in each case, the deputies should clearly state what the incident, call or activity is. For example, instead of saying "I'm 10-8," they will say that they are in service. When Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana, the dozens of responding agencies were told to revert to plain language to avoid misunderstanding emergency calls (Mack, 2009).

Agencies will have to be aware of different situations that would be considered emergencies that require plain language and when coded radio traffic is permissible. It should be considered that eliminating the possibility of this confusion would be beneficial to the agency for safety reasons as well as monetarily. The implementation of changing from coded talk to plain language would not need any additional training for officers and therefore not require any funding.

Training stressors could be reduced with the elimination of signal codes, 10 codes and clearance codes. The field training process for newly hired police officers and communications officers can vary in length. Field training programs differ from department to department and can be a very stressful element of the probation period for new employees. Eliminating the need for the memorization of numerous codes could decrease the training period dramatically. According to the

National Institute of Justice (2010) found that benefits of using plain language can help to create clearer communication across jurisdictional and agency lines. In addition, it may reduce the anxiety experienced by many new officers who have to memorize codes. It should also reduce training time for new officers.

Human error could also have devastating results for agencies still utilizing the radio codes. In July 1975, a publication was written by Pierce R. Brooks based on a

communications study conducted by the Lakewood Department of Public Safety. In this study, it was determined that the use of the clear speech procedure will reduce confusion and air time used through fewer requests for repeats, mistakes, code substitution and language substitutions when compared with the 10 code as originally designed, or as modified by the user (Brooks, 1975)

If an agency has large calls for service record, they would be using numerous codes for these calls. It could, in fact, mean that any particular agency could have up to one hundred codes for service calls, then there would be the 10 codes, and even clearance codes as well. Keep in mind that with this large number of signal code, 10 code and clearance codes, memorization of these codes would be hampered. If officers only use a small number of these codes on a daily, weekly or even monthly basis, then the seldom used signal codes could be forgotten or confused with other codes. If an officer is requesting assistance from a fellow officer, even within the same agency, and the officer's request is for a signal code that is seldom used, the assisting officer could have to stop and look this information up on a listed sheet of signal codes. This could hinder response time for the assisting officer. It should also be noted that half of a department's shift is at night and in low light conditions. If, indeed, the list is substantial in length then it would need to be small enough print to have all of this information on a "cheat sheet." In low light situations, the officer could very well read the wrong code and again place himself or another officer in a life threatening situation that could have been avoided. If an agency's response times suffer then public trust could be compromised.

COUNTERPOSITION

The advent of coded information as opposed to plain language was put into place in large part as an officer safety measure while also taking into account public privacy. The general public might not want any persons who have a radio scanner to know that officers are responding to their address for a possible domestic disturbance. The use of coded language was invented to largely protect or disguise this information. The media also has access to scanners which they use as a tool to keep up with live information on major events occurring within their journalistic areas. If, in fact, a journalist has a scanner and knows the address of a prominent official of the county or a municipality then he would know that a major event, that he thinks might be worthy of reporting, is occurring and could arrive before or as officials are arriving, turning personal family event into an embarrassing situation. It also makes for a safety issue if in fact the reported were to arrive and had aggressions turned towards him then further fueling and instigating the situation.

It should be noted that in this world of ever advancing technologies, the general public will learn, or at least is capable of learning, what these codes mean. All calls for service that police respond to are open to the public for viewing, therefore, allowing anyone to access call sheet information and knowing what type of call has been responded to. Once this information is obtained, anyone who had access to or was listening to the call on a scanner would know what code corresponds with that particular type of call. If a person with all of this access were to compile a list of codes that corresponds with the type of call that was responded to, this information could be publicly displayed. This information could also be displayed on the internet in which

there would be unrestricted world wide access of an agency's coded information.

Recently, there has been an app developed for cell phones which allows the general public to directly download information and enables them to scan police frequencies in their area. With the advent of this application, anyone with this application can listen to radio traffic and with enough time, they will know what is meant to be the unknown.

According to Washington County Sheriff Smith, "It (coded communication) fools no one. Everyone that listens to their scanner knows the code" (Mack, 2009). Portable scanners and a cell phone with the downloaded application of scanning police frequencies further adds to police officer safety since any persons with one of these can respond to the same location and at the same time as law enforcement.

Due to the vast ethnic diversity that agencies employ, some are reluctant to change from coded radio language to plain language. Officers of different ethnicities as well as just being from different geographic locations tend to have accents that might be harder to decipher than while speaking on an in-car radio system. Take into account, for example, the larger geographical area of a state such as the state of Texas. On the eastern side of Texas the general public, as well as officers, might have a strong or predominant Cajun accent. Consider the western or southwestern side of the same state where Texas borders the Mexico line or the New Mexico state line. Officers in these areas might have a strong or predominant Hispanic accent to their manner of speaking. These agencies might consider that the use of coded language is beneficial by taking out the possibility of not being able to easily understand plain language. Training officers to use the same general terms on the radio could alleviate this concern. Officers need to be trained to speak in short, deliberate phrases instead of

complete sentences which would eliminate the need for coded language. Training officers to just speak slowly, plainly and deliberate has no monetary effect on the agencies; they would just be slowing down the manner in which people already speak.

A statement in a publication written in December, 2006, by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security stated that agencies transitioning to plain language will succeed by partnering with a diverse group of stakeholders across all disciplines, developing a practitioner-driven action plan and properly training field personnel and staff affected by the change. Also take into account that if a police department's communications officer is dispatching police officers to a certain address or location for a call, no matter what the call is for, then the communications officer is still required to give the address or location of the event on the radio. Whether an officer is responding to a call as serious as a fight in progress call or a call as minor as a cat that is stuck in a tree, the one common denominator is that the address or location will be spoken over the radio in plain language. It makes little sense to attempt to disguise the nature of the call information with a signal code, for officer safety, if the address or location has been given in plain language. If the officers were responding to a burglary call and the suspects have a portable scanner in their possession and coded radio language is being used for the call information, the suspect might not know why the officers are responding to this particular location, but they will still know the location of the call; if, in fact, it is the location of the suspect's then the suspects would be able to flee, prior to officer arrival, or even worse, set a trap for the responding officers.

In addition, agencies consider the use of plain language to be effective in reducing the amount of air time that is being used while officers are keyed up on the

radio. All agencies, whether they utilize plain language or coded language stress the importance to being keyed up on the radio for an extended amount of time. Officers that are in need of emergency assistance do not need to, nor should they have to wait for other officials who are speaking on the radio to finish their transmission before there is clear radio air and time for them to ask for such assistance. This could be detrimental for an officer who might be in a life or death situation; for example, a 10-17 is considered shorter radio time as opposed to showing this unit en route, which in some agencies might have the same meaning. Messages transmitted in clear speech will take less actual time to transmit than the corresponding 10 code classification. Air time usage will therefore be reduced (Brooks, 1975). Agencies might consider using a code such as signal 17 as opposed to saying the phrase show this unit on a meal break. The key to correcting this possible problem is, again, simple training. Officers who are trained properly in radio etiquette already know the importance of short deliberate radio transmissions and just need to take the time to speak correctly.

RECOMMENDATION

In the recent declining economy, the utilization of outside or neighboring agencies in critical incidents has become an undesirable burden within the first responder community. The application of plain language in place of coded communication reduces the possibility of miscommunication between departments. Officer safety, as well as public safety can be directly impacted in a positive way with the elimination of coded communication and its ambiguous meaning. The use of plain language will decrease field training times and some stressors of new officer, communication officers, and first responders during the training process and in the field.

Semantic barriers or thick accents can be addressed with short concise standardized plain language terminology, therefore reducing the need for coded communication. With the advancement of technology, the need for coded communication to act as a shield or disguise from those who have radio scanners is all but eliminated, as it is no longer confidential information but open public record.

Law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve will certainly be affected by eliminating coded communication in lieu of plain language, in a positive way. Specific results of this change would be a reduction in response times, fewer mistakes, and interdepartmental cohesiveness. In this day of limited budget flexibility, not having to train communication officers and first responders to department specific communication codes would have no impact financially.

Eliminating the use of signal codes, clearance codes, and ten codes is recommended. Plain language can be effective radio communication without jeopardizing officer safety or public privacy, with no budgetary restraints or time consuming training. Critical incidents and or large scale operations involving multiple agencies would not be hindered by a single department's operational procedures.

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